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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an innovative five-day training program for foreign language teaching assistants (TAs) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW). The program developed out of a perceived need to train graduate students better for the teaching profession and to develop colleague support. In the UW program, the French and Italian, German, and Spanish and Portuguese departments joined forces to offer a preregistration orientation workshop to incoming TAs. The five-day session was designed to provide classroom "survival skills" for teaching the courses immediately assigned them, sensitize TAs to the common fears and frustrations of beginning foreign language learners, begin to instill professional attitudes and attributes to be developed in later TA formal training, provide a forum for exchange on methods and techniques of the various departments, and allow TAs to concentrate solely on acquisition of teaching skills without the pressures and distractions of registration week. Evaluation of the early workshops found them to be useful in increasing TAs' pedagogical skills and knowledge. More recent programs have been somewhat reduced in scope and have been returned to registration week for reasons of funding, but the interdepartmental effort continues to offer a more balanced introduction to being a TA than previously. The appendices provide workshop materials: an agenda; a workshop evaluation form; and an introductory survey form for participants. (MSE)

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IMPROVED TRAINING OF TEACHING ASSISTANTS THROUGH INTER-DEPARTMENTAL COOPERATION

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ABSTRACT

The training of teaching assistants (TAs) is a major concern of large foreign language departments. As our nation scrutinizes how teachers are prepared for our public schools, we can expect renewed emphasis on teacher preparation at the university level as well. In institutions where TAs do a large portion of lower-level language teaching, one of the main components of the TA training program is the pre-semester orientation. This article describes an innovative, inter-departmental orientation program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison that used multi-language micro-teaching to prepare new TAs to meet their first classes with greater knowledge and confidence.

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IMPROVED TRAINING OF TEACHING ASSISTANTS THROUGH INTER-DEPARTMENTAL COOPERATION

Over the part two decades major foreign language departments have steadily increased the amount and quality of training they offer to their teaching assistants (TA's) prior to the beginning of their teaching duties. In the early 1960's, a survey by MacAllister (8) showed that most institutions offered little TA training. In 1979 two surveys indicated improvement in TA preparation for teaching, yet one-fifth of the responding departments had no TA training programs (Schulz 10) and available programs varied greatly from institution to institution in type, duration, and quality (Nerenz, Herron, and Knop 9). By 1989, another survey by Gibaldi and Mirollo (7, p. 26) found that TA training has now assumed an important role in many departments, leading these researchers to concluded that: "A crucial change in attitude is taking place toward the importance of teaching in the preparation of graduate students for the profession."

Many major foreign language departments now offer new TA's a two- to five-day orientation workshop prior to their first semester of teaching. As Ervin and Muyskens (6) make clear, however, the

skills TA's need to acquire are so numerous that a few days of orientation to teaching are insufficient, especially when they occur during a busy and stressful week, devoted also to registration procedures and adapting to an unfamiliar university system and to life in a new city. Despite improvements in TA training procedures, then, our profession continues to call for program innovation and upgrade (DiDonato 3) and laments the difficult role of TA trainers and supervisors who must often work without colleague support, both in orientation programs and in TA supervision throughout the year (Schulz 10; Dvorak 4).

This cry for more professional preparation for TA's receives force from calls for improved teacher preparation for public school certification (DiDonato 2; Wing 12). Just this past spring the Holmes (11) and Carnegie (1) reports have outlined plans for improving teacher preparation programs for the secondary level. National organizations, including the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the American Association of Teachers of French (AATF), and the American Association of Teachers of German (AATG) are currently working to promote greater awareness and need for teacher training and eventually to make specific statements concerning professional standards for foreign language teachers. In addition to affecting public school teachers, these far-reaching efforts should also further stimulate the development of TA training programs on the university level.

This article reports on one such program: an innovative five-day TA training program developed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW) in 1982 and 1983, and continued, in modified form, to the present. Through inter-departmental cooperation, this program offers more intensive training to a larger number of TA's in different language departments than available previously at UW and satisfies the need of TA supervisors to work closely with colleagues, sharing the burden and the excitement of preparing new classroom teachers.

Background

In foreign language departments at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW), as at most major institutions, teaching assistants are usually responsible for teaching most of the beginning language courses. During the first semester of 1981, for example, there were over 4,000 students enrolled in French, German, and Spanish first- and second-year courses. Since the teaching of these beginning students is mainly in the hands of TA's, many of whom are not only new to the University but to teaching altogether, language departments need to provide TA's with the best possible training and preparation previous to their initial teaching experience.

Every year there is a large number of inexperienced, incoming TA's in UW foreign language departments. Up to 1982, the major departments (French and Italian, German, and Spanish and Portuguese) had offered individual orientation programs for incoming TA's directed by single faculty members during the week of

registration. However, some departments had no TA training program. The department-organized orientation programs varied in length and intensity from department to department and resulted in duplication of effort without the benefit of sharing and cooperation among different faculties. In addition, TA's in departments that could not afford to organize their own programs had received little preparation before they began to teach.

The New Inter-Departmental Orientation Program

In the summers of 1982 and 1983 the Departments of French and Italian, German, and Spanish and Portuguese first offered a voluntary five-day orientation workshop open to approximately 50 incoming TA's in all foreign language departments. This program, funded by grants from the Committee on Undergraduate Education and the Knapp Foundation, UW-Madison, combined the talents and experience of various faculty members to give new TA's a richer, more varied, and more profitable training experience. TA's attended demonstrations and discussions, viewed videotapes, prepared sample lessons, and participated in micro-teaching with other TA's of different language backgrounds. Faculty members also profited from the exchange of ideas in this cooperative effort.

Objectives

The program took place the week prior to registration. It had five main objectives:

(1) to provide incoming TA's with "survival-skill" preparation in order to teach the courses to which they would be immediately assigned;

(2) to sensitize TA's to the fears and frustrations often experienced by beginning foreign language learners;

(3) to begin to instill in the TA's the professional attributes and attitudes toward teaching that could be developed in subsequent formal intra-departmental training;

(4) to provide a forum for exchange of ideas on methods and techniques among various language departments and to promote sharing of pedagogical knowledge; and

(5) to allow TA's to concentrate solely on the acquisition of teaching skills without the many added pressures of registration week (adapted from Ervin 5).

Topics and Activities.

To meet these objectives, the program encouraged discussion across language groups and provided for training and practice which was more language-specific (for schedule, see Appendix 1). Some of the topics covered included: auditory discrimination, pronunciation problems (difficult phonemes), teaching dialogues (Gouin Series), oral drilling and practice, teaching grammar, dealing with learner errors, responding to students' feelings and needs, using the textbook and accompanying materials, and preparing a first-day lesson plan.

Teaching demonstrations were given by various faculty members and experienced TA's. During these sessions, TA's who did not know the language being taught acted as students. After each presentation, TA's and faculty members discussed the techniques and rationale used.

These activities culminated in TA participation in peer micro-teaching sessions. TA's taught lessons they had prepared to other TA participants in different languages. Languages varied from year to year, including Hebrew, Russian, Japanese, Chinese, Swahili, Norwegian, Italian, French, German, and Spanish. This peer-teaching served two purposes: (1) TA's actually taught people who, at least in theory, did not know the language being taught; and (2) TA's found themselves in a position of beginning language learners and thus re-experienced the anxiety and excitement of initial language learning.

Evaluation of the Workshop

On the last day, all TA participants evaluated the program. TA's assessed each presentation and/or activity by ranking it on a scale of "not useful" to "very useful" and offered specific suggestions and general comments. Evaluations were very positive with most activities rated "very useful" or "useful." The most useful activity was clearly the cross-language micro-teaching; the least useful was "none." (For details, see the evaluation summary from 1983 in Appendix 2.)

In addition, a pre- and post-test questionnaire was used to assess the knowledge of methods and techniques that TA's acquired during the intensive workshop. This instrument included objective questions on methodology, short critiques of teaching techniques, and exercises in handling hypothetical classroom situations (see Appendix 3). All TA's improved from pre- to post-testing: in 1982 from 44% (pre-test) to 76% (post-test) and in 1983 from 50% (pre-test) to 85% (post-test).

Budget

In 1982, the orientation was funded by a $13,273.00 Undergraduate Teaching Improvement Grant from the Committee on Undergraduate Education at the UW-Madison. This sum covered faculty salaries and fringe benefits for a week ($3,978), TA stipends ($9,105 at $200 plus fringe benefits per TA), and secretarial help and supplies ($190.00). In 1983, the project was funded by a slightly smaller grant from the Knapp Foundation, UW-Madison, that necessitated reducing the TA honorarium from $200 to $150.

Following the 1983 Workshop

From 1984 to the present, the orientation has been funded through the individual language departments and, of necessity, has thus been returned to registration week and slightly reduced in scope. Having the workshop during registration week has led to some scheduling conflicts between requirements for being a graduate students (proficiency testing, advising, registration procedures) and the requirement for the TA workshop, and hence an apparent increase in stress. Yet, it has allowed departments to present a more balanced introduction to being a TA and a graduate students and it means a financial savings for the university. No stipends are provided for faculty and TA's, who are both on contract during this time; rather, compensation is given at the discretion of individual departments, usually through reduction of teaching workloads during the semester. Although yearly adjustments are made in workshop activities, inter-departmental micro-teaching

remains the central and most valuable part of the orientation program.

Conclusion

The training begun in this five-day intensive workshop is continued during the academic year in the various language departments. In some departments TA's are either strongly encouraged or required to enroll in a methods course in foreign language teaching. These courses offer more in-depth study of the topics introduced during the intensive orientation workshop and allow TA's to see the wider spectrum of foreign language teaching beyond their own first-semester classrooms. Finally, TA's are supervised through the year by course chairpersons who provide the basic structure of the introductory classes taught by TA's and offer TA's advice on teaching techniques. The new orientation workshop was not designed to replace any of these established activities, but rather to reinforce them by offering TA's a head start on what is often a difficult and long-term endeavor--the development of the skills, knowledge, and attributes of professional university instructors.

Now after five years of offering this orientation in ever-evolving formats, we at the UW-Madison are convinced that our inter-departmental efforts are far superior than the independent department programs run previously. Both TA's and faculty benefit from the collaboration, in sharing of expertise and in building professional relationships. As we in the foreign language profession again turn our attention to teacher preparation

programs, we should seriously consider such inter-departmental, collaborative efforts as means of broadening our perspectives and efficiently upgrading our teacher-training programs.

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APPENDIX 1

TA ORIENTATION WORKSHOP
FALL 1983

MONDAY

9:00 - 10:15	Departmental Group Meetings: General Orientation.
10:15-10:30	Break
10:30-11:45	Whole Group Meeting: Orientation to the workshop.
11:45-1:00	Lunch
1:00-3:00	Whole Group Meeting: Teaching a dialogue.
3:00-5:00	Reception, 19th Floor

Assignment: Prepare to teach 4-6 dialogue sentences (10 minutes).

TUESDAY

9:00-10:30	Cross-Language Groups: Teaching a dialogue.
10:30-10:45	Break
10:45-Noon	Whole Group Meeting: Exchange of ideas regarding teaching a dialogue. General classroom procedures.
12:00-1:30	Lunch
1:30-3:30	Whole Group Meeting: Teaching a pattern practice.

Assignment: Prepare a 10 minute pattern practice (based on dialogue).

WEDNESDAY

9:00-10:30	Cross Language Groups: Teaching a pattern practice.
10:30-10:45	Break
10:45-Noon	Departmental Group Meetings: Teaching grammar.
12:00-1:30	Lunch
1:30-3:30	Departmental Group Meetings: Demonstrations of a grammar lesson.

Assignment: Prepare a grammar lesson (10 to 15 minutes).

THURSDAY

9:00-11:00	Cross-Language Groups: Teaching a grammar point.
11:00-11:15	Break
11:15-11:45	Whole Group Meeting: Discussion on teaching grammar.
11:45-1:30	Lunch
1:30-2:30	Departmental Group Meetings: Developing listening skills; teaching pronunciation.
2:30-2:45	Break
2:45-3:30	Departmental Group Meeting: First day lesson plans-goals and activities.

Assignment: Re-teach one of your lessons.

FRIDAY

9:00-10:30	Cross-Language Groups: Re-teaching a previous lesson.
10:30-10:45	Break
10:45-11:45	Whole Group Meeting: Correcting errors.
11:45-1:30	Lunch
1:30-3:30	Departmental Group Meetings: Post-test and evaluation. Demonstration of a 1st day lesson plan.

Appendix 2

EVALUATION OF TA ORIENTATION WORKSHOP - 1983

Language you will be teaching _____

Number of years of previous teaching experience _____

I. Please react to the following items, by indicating:
(numbers indicate number of TAs answering)

	very useful	useful	somewhat useful	not useful
a) The idea of having an orientation workshop before registration week.	33	3		
b) The idea of having a workshop combined with other language departments.	32	4		
c) The general organization of this workshop.	26	10		
d) Discussion of methods and techniques in cross-language groups.	27	5	3	
e) Discussion of methods and techniques in departmental language groups.	25	9	2	
f) Your micro-teaching experience.	27	8	1	
g) Demonstrations by experienced teachers.	27	8	1	

II. How much progress have you made in your knowledge/skills in the following areas?
(numbers indicate number of TAs answering)

	a great deal of progress	good progress	some progress	little progress	no progress
a) Teaching dialogues.	16	13	6		
b) Classroom procedures.	12	17	6		
c) Teaching pattern practices.	22	12	2		
d) Teaching grammar.	18	13	3	1	
e) Teaching listening skills and pronunciation.	11	15	8	2	
f) Correcting errors.	17	11	6	1	
g) Lesson planning.	12	11	9	1	

(numbers in parentheses indicate number of TAs who made this comment when greater than 1)

1. Which activities seem most and least useful to you and why?

Most

Micro-teaching in cross-language groups (27)

All activities (7)

Other TAs demonstrations (3)

Comments from peers (2)

Teaching listening skills

Patterns practices

Very specific and practical subjects (pattern practices)

Teaching dialogues and grammar

Correcting errors

Grammar presentation

Lesson planning

Whole group for cohesiveness

Discussion and practice of techniques

Everything done in small groups

Cross-language groups most useful but I didn't like it

Least

None (23)

Whole group meetings (3) (over-repetition, overdone)

Discussions after cross-language groups good but too superficial

How to teach grammar

Departmental meetings because it wasn't the language I'll be teaching

Two discussions in large group: "classroom procedures" and "problems in teaching inductively"

Whole group meeting on teaching grammar (It had already been done)

Critiquing in cross-language groups should be done on card not orally.

I'm overwhelmed with info (but useful)

Lesson planning: should not be only the mechanics of structuring a 50 minute lesson.

Some of the harangue in whole group sessions

Too many repetitions

Too much time

Dialogue, pattern practice and lesson planning but only because they can't apply to the language I teach

Confusion: Western style of teaching vs. Chinese style

2. Do you feel the workshop adequately prepared you for your first few days of teaching? If no, why not?

yes (27)

No (1) (because my class will be more literature taught in English)

I don't know if it prepared me, but extremely useful, gave me ideas (3)

More or less (with more time it would be more useful)

It provided knowledge and motivation

I could have used another week

Now I feel more sure

And not only for the first few days

Essentials were covered thoroughly

I feel better equipped to deal with language related and non-language related problems

Yes and no! Cross-language group good, but they weren't "real students"

I feel more confident. It made me aware of problems that might not have occurred to me.

I have an idea of what to expect and how to handle certain situations.

3. Suggestions for improving the orientation program

Stick to time schedule (4) (Provide enough time for each activity)

A "little" larger room for whole group (3)

Longer orientation workshop (2)

Fewer faculty interruptions during whole group meetings (2)

Less theory, more practice (2)

Shortening days (difficult, though)

Make it a requirement

Video-tape our own presentations for discussion

Explain that overwhelming amount of material given on first day will be gone over later.

Do some deductive teaching of pedagogical terms (too much vocabulary)

Day-to-day change of cross-language groups

Workshops should not prepare us only for first few days.

Less repetition and more work on some new items.

More time on teaching difficult points of grammar in target language

More opportunities to discuss and practice activities other than drilling

Invite instructors or TAs whose styles are less flamboyant

Include more oriental languages

Forming a group with all TAs from small language departments

10:00 to 4:30

Shy TAs (including me) appreciated the more quiet ones

Coffee and donuts in the a.m.

4. Would you recommend that new TAs next year take a similar orientation workshop?

Yes (34)

Highly

Old TAs who haven't had "official" training should take it.

It really takes the fear out of teaching. Our students will benefit from it too.

And include classical languages as well.

5. Would you have taken this workshop without an honorarium?

Yes. (26) (If it were 2-3 days) (But I would have felt funny about it).

Probably (5) (Honorarium was a factor in my decision. But I wouldn't have liked to walk into class without preparation), (but I suggest not removing that little extra incentive) (but it helped-long time till Oct. 1).

It is very appropriate. (3)

It sure helps. (3)

No. (1)

If I were a new TA, I would attend of my own free will.

Amazing: I'm being paid instead of paying

For new TAs only

Why not?

If I had known before hand the quality of instruction to expect

I did, and it was worth it.

Housing in return for honorarium

It helped me eat during the week

I might not have come back after first couple days without an honorarium. Glad I stayed.

6. General Comments

Excellent, essential preparation (5)

A real good workshop (4)

It built confidence (3)

Good chance to meet other TAs and profs. (2)

You're doing a great job!

Congratulations and thanks

The team of instructors was absolutely incredible! If we teach as well as we were taught, we'll be fantastic!

Professors were excellent, nice, friendly, supportive, skilled.

A great job done by profs, older and new TAs.

Instructors were so helpful and encouraging. Materials so useful. Gave me the idea of what teaching is all about.

Extremely well organized. Helped me tremendously.

Learned a lot more than in a several month course I took.

Learned a tremendous amount.

Extremely happy to have participated.

Gave us opportunity to practice a lot

Rewarding experience

I feel much more secure. All new TAs should have a chance of getting an orientation like this

Pedagogical confidence building. Best of all I met other brand-new TAs and TAs from other departments.

Teaching in cross-language groups is a great idea.

It's been a long week (a good sign)

Whole group meetings not as good as small ones, but nice for meeting people.

Some lectures repeated too many details.

Drunkness of pedagogy in some instructors

There should be presentation of "opposing views". "Heretics" didn't have much to say.

Encourage TAs to get together in the evening right from the first day.

20/ACTS

Appendix 3

TA ORIENTATION WORKSHOP 1986

INTRODUCTORY SURVEY

The purpose of this survey is to inform us about your knowledge of teaching techniques. You will have a maximum of 20 minutes to complete these questions.

NAME _____

NATIVE LANGUAGE _____

LANGUAGE YOU WILL BE TEACHING _____

NUMBER OF YEARS OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE AND LEVEL (high school, university intro courses, etc.)

_____

_____

(If experienced teacher) TEACHING APPROACH/METHOD YOU HAVE USED

_____

_____

21/Appendix3

5 MINUTES TRUE/FALSE — Circle the correct answer, and if the item is false, cross out the false part and write in the correction to make the statement true.

T F 1. The maximum number of syllables that students can retain for repetition after the teacher is 10 syllables.

_____

T F 2. The main purpose of learning dialogues is to master grammatical points in the language.

_____

T F 3. All pronunciation errors should be corrected during grammar drills.

_____

T F 4. Only the instructor should correct errors.

_____

T F 5. A single pattern drill should not exceed 10 minutes.

_____

T F 6. Up to three structural problems can be addressed in a pattern drill.

_____

T F 7. Intensive practice in developing listening skills affects students' success in speaking.

_____

T F 8. Difficult sounds should first be drilld predominantly in isolation.

_____

T F 9. Three sentences are sufficient to make a grammar dill effective.

_____

T F 10. In beginning foreign language courses, it is less important that students state rules than that they use them correctly in communication.

_____

15 MINUTES PROBLEMS — For the purpose of this survey, consider English to be the target language in the following problems. Make your answers brief and to the point.

1. Name and give two examples of appropriate techniques for teaching this dialogue. (Refer to the sentence number.)

   1. What time did you get up this morning?
   2. I got up at 6:00.
   3. So early? How come?
   4. I had to study for an exam.

2. Explain in detail three successive steps for correcting the underlined error:

   Yesterday, I goed to the store.

3. Suggest three different ways of cueing the changes in this substitution drill other than repetition after the teacher.

   I am looking at: (1) the board; (2) the book; (3) the pencil; (4) the lesson; (5) the teacher (6) the girl; (7) the boy.

4. Conducting our classes in the foreign language is considered essential. what three things (other than translation) can you as a teacher do to make sure that students understand the foreign language?

5. Indicate two advantages of teaching grammar inductively instead of deductively.